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DAVID HUME
&
THE MIRACULOUS

offered
BY
A. E. TAYLOR *1869-*

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Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh

THE
LESLIE STEPHEN LECTURE

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DAVID HUME



THE MIRACULOUS



WHEN THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE did me the high honour of inviting me to deliver this lecture, I could not but feel that the invitation, in some sort, determined for me the subject of my discourse. The character of the field of letters in which Sir Leslie Stephen achieved such well-deserved renown made it plain that my theme must be the life or doctrine of a British philosopher, by preference a philosopher of that eighteenth century which Sir Leslie Stephen himself had done so much to illustrate by his writings. To the occupant of a Chair of Moral Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh the philosopher could not well be any one but David Hume, the most famous, even if not the greatest, of all Scottish metaphysical thinkers and, with the single exception of Walter Scott, the most distinguished man of letters whose life has been closely connected with the city of Edinburgh. The philosophical thought of Hume, as a whole, is no

topic for the discourse of an hour, but that space of time may be profitably, and I trust not unentertainingly, spent on a consideration of the side-issue raised by the once notorious tenth section of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* which deals with *Miracles*. Historically, this essay is interesting by reason of the scandal it created, and was perhaps intended by its author to create. To it, and not to the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, which were not published during Hume's life, our philosopher owed the ill-repute he enjoyed alike with the orthodox Presbyterians of Aberdeen and the High Anglican Churchmen of Oxford, the set of Johnson and Wesley; to it, in the main, he owes the admiration of modern "anticlericals," who have regarded him as a hero of militant "free-thought." The entertaining feature of the situation, to the reflective mind, is that this reputation, for good or ill, is quite undeserved. It is as certain as anything in biography can be that Hume was, in point of fact, no anticlerical zealot, but an amiable and easy-going man of the world whose chosen social circle consisted largely of the "moderates" among the Edinburgh Presbyterians. The members of that circle, to be sure, were not men of the faith which

removes mountains and conquers the world. But they valued established beliefs as a bulwark of comfort, peace and social order, and would have been the last persons to sanction a violent and wanton attack on any set of doctrines which serve to keep the "vulgar" in their place and to guarantee the "thinking" minority against disturbers of their ease and leisure. They may fairly be presumed to have understood that Hume's assault on the "bigotry, ignorance, cunning and roguery" of that considerable "part of mankind" who profess belief in the miraculous meant very much less than it looked, on the face of it, to mean. They would be confirmed in the suspicion, if they entertained it, by observing that, for the purposes of the *Enquiry*, the whole section is completely superfluous, while the known character of Hume makes it impossible to account for its presence as the irrelevancy of the fanatic who has got, for the time being, upon his dangerous topic. The irrelevance is, indeed, so manifest that it seems best explained by the suggestion of Hume's learned editor, Mr Selby-Bigge, who supposes that the philosopher's motive in the assault was a simple craving for notoriety at any cost. The "learned world," as we know,

“said nothing to the paradoxes” of Hume’s *Treatise*; he was determined that it should say something to them in their amended version, and none too scrupulous about the methods by which publicity was to be ensured. Hence the combined violence and irrelevance of a section which was at least certain to get the *Enquiry* talked about, as it very effectually did. A similar explanation can, as I hope to show, be given of the apparently strange logic of Hume’s argument. On the face of it, there would seem to be something amiss with reasoning which proceeds from the principle that “a wise man proportions his belief to the evidence” to the conclusion that in a vast, if none too well defined, field, the “wise man” will simply refuse to consider “the evidence” at all. We cannot be surprised that Hume’s admirer, Huxley, should have been much more perturbed by reasoning of this kind than his unfriendly critic Green, whose objection to the argument, indeed, does not go further than to urge that it does not come with the best of grace from the mouth of our professed sceptic. If we look more closely, I believe we shall see that the reasoning, interpreted in the light of Hume’s professed general doctrine, certainly proves something, but something

very different from what Hume had suggested by his boast of having discovered an argument which "will, with the wise and learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion." What has really been proved, as Hume himself says at the end of the whole discussion, would certainly not destroy the faith of the average Presbyterian of the eighteenth century, though it should leave a thinking Presbyterian dissatisfied; as Hume does not say, it should also leave the serious believer in science at least equally concerned. The "academic" or "sceptical" philosopher of Hume's own type is, in fact, left in the position of an amused spectator of the conflict between two irrationalities. We miss half of Hume's irony unless we understand that it is meant to hit not only "dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the Christian religion" but also "dangerous friends or disguised enemies" to Newtonian science. I trust I need not say that I do not myself regard amused detached contemplation of either Christianity or natural science as a right attitude in a rational man. But it is an attitude very characteristic of the century of so-called "good sense," and none the less likely to be the secret attitude of David Hume, that it is

hard to say which would have been more enraged by it, if he had understood it, John Wesley or T. H. Huxley.

It is desirable, before we go any further, to set out the steps of the argument we are to consider as briefly and boldly as we can. If we try to do so, it will be found, I think, to fall into eleven successive propositions, which I will state in order, with a minimum of exegetical comment. We begin (1) with the proposition, taken from Archbishop Tillotson, that the evidential value of the testimony of others, so long as it is considered as the testimony of others and nothing more, is always inferior to that of our own senses, a thesis I should not be too ready to concede myself without a great deal of qualification, since in many cases I should put vastly more confidence in the report of a trained observer than I should in my own eyes. (2) We are next told that this general principle is now to be applied to "accounts of miracles and prodigies found in all history, sacred and profane." "Miracle" is here apparently equated with "prodigy," and neither word receives any definition. In the course of the argument, we shall find two other incidental definitions of "miracle" introduced. Unfortunately, the

definitions are not coincident, and to adopt either seriously obscures the nature of the reasoning. For the present, so far as can be seen from the context, "miracle" and "prodigy" both mean any very unusual and unexpected event, anything which, to use a definition I once heard given by a divine, makes one say "O!" (3) We now take it into account that some events are found in experience to be "constantly conjoined"; other conjunctions are more variable. Here we must, of course, remember that it is part of Hume's general metaphysical doctrine that there is no "necessary connection" between events. All events are separate, and there is nothing in the character of any event which demands that it should be continued in one way rather than in another. All our information is that certain types of event have been found, we do not and cannot know why, to be continued in certain ways and not in others. (4) A wise man, then, will always "proportion" his belief in any statement about a succession of events related to have taken place "to the evidence." This is interpreted to mean that he will *count* the number of "instances" in which a conjunction of the kind in question has occurred, and the number of instances in

which one member of the conjoined pair of events has occurred without being continued by the other. It is on this counting that the wise man will base his judgment of the *probability* of the alleged narrative. (5) Further, all inference is founded solely on "our experience of the constant and regular conjunction" of events and on nothing else. Among the events covered by this principle are the true and false statements made to us by others. Hence the principle applies, among other things, to our inferences about the trustworthiness or untrustworthiness of human testimony. (6) Hence, when we are offered testimony to alleged facts which "partake of the extraordinary and the marvellous," there is a "conflict of opposite experiences." We have, in fact, to balance our knowledge that the unusual and unexpected sometimes happens against our knowledge that informants sometimes, from various causes, speak falsely, whether intentionally or not. This is why it was reasonable in "the Indian prince" to be incredulous when he was first told of the freezing of water in our northern winter, though it would have been unreasonable to persist in his incredulity if he had had numerous independent reports to the same effect

from informants with no motive for deception. The general result, so far, then, is that the strangeness of an alleged sequence of events diminishes the probability of its reality, except when the testimony for the sequence is so strong that it would be still stranger that all the witnesses should be mistaken or untruthful. (7) There is one case in which the value of testimony is not merely diminished by the "conflict of experiences," but actually reduced to zero. This is the case when the event testified to is a "miracle," that is to say, a *violation* of the "laws of nature," or, what comes to the same thing, of "the common course of nature." This would be the case with testimony to the resuscitation of a dead man, since such a conjunction between death and subsequent resuscitation has "never been observed." There is "uniform experience against it." Here we observe that the reasoning is affected by the introduction of a disturbing element, a new definition of "miracle." We have been concerned with the general question of the worth of testimony to the unusual and unexpected *in genere*, and it has been assumed that we know nothing of "laws" or "patterns" in nature which prescribe one continuation of a course of events rather than any

other. The only difference permissible according to our fifth proposition is that between a familiar and an unfamiliar continuation, and the only conclusion to which we are really entitled is that it is *natural* to be incredulous when we are told of the unfamiliar, as the Indian prince was mistakenly incredulous about the freezing of water. The shift from the unfamiliar to the "contrary to uniform experience" is confusing and unjustified, but indispensable to the further development of the argument, and directly causes the inconsequence on which Hume's critics have remarked. It is quietly forgotten that, on the premisses, there cannot be said to be "uniform experience" against the resuscitation of the dead man or any other sequence of events. At best I have only a uniformity within the range of *my own* experience to urge; a narrator who professes to have seen the resuscitation is actually appealing to his own experience as the foundation of his story. Thus, unless I am to assume that my own personal experiences are the standard of the credible—and if I do assume this, there is an end of all correction of expectations—it is a *petitio principii* to say that there is "uniform experience" against any event to which any man claims to be able to

testify, and there is no basis for any distinction between the "miraculous" and that which is merely unfamiliar, and therefore startling, to a particular person. The paradox that the principle that "belief should always be proportioned to evidence" justifies, in a certain class of cases, rejection of testimony without examination, is only established by the illegitimate device of changing a fundamental definition in the course of the argument. A foot-note which introduces a further *distinguo* seems to show that Hume is a little uneasy about this procedure. It admits that the testimony may, after all, really justify belief in a fact which *seems* "miraculous," *i.e.* a fact to which my experience affords no analogy, though it does not justify belief in the "miraculous" character of the fact. This leads to a third definition of a "miracle" as "a transgression of the laws of nature *by a particular volition of the Deity or by the interposition of an invisible agent.*" Apparently, then, in spite of what has been said, Hume would admit that there may be adequate testimony to the resuscitation of a dead man. There might be evidence which would require us to admit the fact, though none which would establish the point that the fact was due to a "particular volition of the

Deity." (The reference to the "invisible agent" appears to be a needless rhetorical amplification.) This third definition of "miracle," sprung on us in a foot-note, seems to be the most unfortunate feature of the argument. It obviously disposes at once of all which had apparently been secured by the appeal to the inviolability of "laws of nature," since it permits us to accept as facts the sequences of events which that appeal was intended to rule out, provided only that we do not profess to have proved by testimony that the facts have "a particular volition of the Deity" as their cause. In this version of the matter, there is no story of legend or folk-lore which a sufficient number of testimonies might not require us to accept as a genuine account of facts, provided only that we eliminate all reference to "the Deity" or "invisible agents." It is not clear how a principle compatible with this position is to be of any use to "the wise and learned" as an "everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion"; yet it is clear that this, and not the much more radical procedure of dismissing a whole class of alleged events without scrutiny of the testimony for them, is the only consequence really compatible with the principles on which

Hume's polemic professedly rests. The upshot, after all, is no more than the statement, which might be made about all testimony to anything, that no testimony can establish a fact unless the falsity of the testimony would be more unlikely than the unreality of the alleged fact. This is virtually admitted when Hume proceeds to formulate his eighth proposition.

(8) In no actual case of a reported "miracle" do we find the testimony to be of this strength. This is, of course, itself an allegation about a fact, and we observe that before we are entitled to make it, we must tacitly surrender what appeared to have been secured by the appeal to "inviolable laws." If the weakness of the testimony is to be a relevant consideration in determining the credibility of the supposed event, we must examine the testimony before we can pronounce it to be weak. The proposed dismissal of testimony without examination has thus led us to nothing, and ought to be eliminated from the reasoning as a superfluous complication. How completely the ambiguity of the word "miracle" has vitiated the argument is shown when Hume goes on, in this connection, to urge it as a grave objection to stories of

alleged marvels in the career of Mohammed that Plutarch, Livy and Tacitus record marvels as occurring in their own age at Rome. This is meant to suggest the objection that the marvels, if they occur, must be regarded as "evidences" in favour of a religion, but evidences in favour of incompatible religions may be considered as destructive of one another. Plainly, this consideration, whatever it may be worth, has no bearing on the value of the historical testimony, considered simply as testimony to the actual occurrence of an unusual fact. It concerns not the fact, but the "theological" interpretation of the fact. Thus it appears to be an authenticated fact that the first volley of the firing party told off to execute the Bāb severed the cord by which the victim was secured without doing him any injury. Hume's reasoning would require us to discount the excellent testimony to the fact, on the plea that similar stories related in the *Acts* of Christian martyrs may be regarded as so many *testimonies* against the occurrence of the fact in the case of the Bāb.

(9) We now reach what is meant to be the conclusion from all the considerations so far put before us. No testimony to a "miracle" has ever amounted to a probability, much less

to a proof, and even if the testimony, in any case, did amount to proof, it would be opposed by another proof derived from the "very nature of the fact which it would endeavour to establish." Here, as it seems to me, confusion of thought reaches a maximum. To know that it is a fact that no such testimony *has* ever amounted to a probability, we must, of course, have examined the amount and character of the testimony, and thus have made it a duty to do the very thing Hume originally proposed to show superfluous. It is at least difficult to understand the suggestion that there could be a *proof* of any proposition if there were also a *proof* of a second and incompatible proposition, unless the remark is meant as a mere rhetorical amplification of the statement that proof of the "miraculous" is not forthcoming. The final appeal to "the very nature of the fact," which proof of the "miraculous" would "endeavour to establish," takes us back again to the position which has just been incidentally abandoned, that there is a whole class of cases in which testimony may properly be dismissed *without* examination, and this, if justified, makes the very weakness of the testimony, the point on which Hume is specially insisting, irrelevant.

(10) We next have a curiously qualified retraction of this attempted return to the abandoned position. The occurrence of "violations of the usual course of nature" may actually be *proved* by testimony, but they cannot be so proved as to make them "the foundation of a system of religion." Since we have never been told exactly what is meant by a "religion," this admission is not very enlightening, but it is illustrated by a singular example. There might be testimony which would not merely make it probable, but actually prove that the whole earth was covered by a mysterious darkness for the first week of January 1600. If the testimony were abundant and of good quality, we should have to accept this as a fact, and look for an explanation, though our present knowledge of science suggests none. But no testimony whatever could give us any ground to believe that Queen Elizabeth died on January 1st of that year, was buried, reappeared again and resumed the government in the following month. And "if this miracle should be ascribed to any new system of religion," we might dismiss the testimony without examination. I confess I cannot see on what ground Hume makes any distinction between the two

cases he has, with notable bad taste, been pleased to imagine. If it is true that experience is our only criterion, the two imagined sequences seem exactly alike in being wholly startling and unfamiliar, and I should have thought that the same kind and amount of testimony might serve indifferently to accredit either. There is as much or as little precedent for one as for the other. And, again, it is hard to understand why testimony to either, seeing that on Hume's own theory it would have some initial value, however slight, should lose all that value merely because the belief in the event had led *ex post facto* to the appearance of a "new system of religion." Presumably, the thought in Hume's mind is that the partisans of a "system of religion" already in existence, especially of one fighting its way to victory over its rivals, are likely to be unduly disposed to believe in, or even to invent, stories of marvels which recommend it, and that this diminishes the evidential value of their testimony. This, no doubt, is a truth, though not a specially novel one. But he appears to be using this obvious reflection in a surely illegitimate way to destroy the whole value of testimony, even outside testimony, to marvellous events which have preceded and

caused the "new system of religion." Where the "system" has actually been called into being by antecedent belief in the occurrence of a "miracle," manifestly the fact that the belief has had this historical effect cannot in any way diminish the probability of the truth of the antecedent belief, except in so far as we might have reason to suspect the adherents of the "new system" of successful suppression of evidence which would tell against the truth of their story. This would be a relevant consideration, but one which could only be taken into account on the assumption that we scrutinise testimonies and do not dismiss them unexamined.

(11) We come at last to the surprising and famous *volte-face* with which Hume ends his essay. There is nothing in what we have heard, in spite of obvious allusions in the worst of taste, which plays into the hands of opponents of "our most holy religion." For that is founded altogether on faith, not on reason. The Scripture history is full of incidents which are infinitely improbable. The testimony for them, judged by the principles which have been laid down for our guidance, amounts to nothing at all, and we might therefore suppose that the benefit promised at the

beginning of the essay to the "wise" would prove to be the abolition of Christianity. But Hume reminds himself at the close that since, on his own showing, "the Christian religion . . . cannot be believed by any reasonable person" without a miracle, any one who does believe "is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding," and the arguments against "miracles" must obviously fail when addressed to a person who has the actual present experience of one in himself. The lameness of the conclusion, when it is compared with the vaunting of Hume's *exordium*, has naturally given rise to the current view that it is a mere piece of mockery—a transparent substitute for the true ending, like the *finale* of a Euripidean tragedy on Dr Verrall's interpretation of the poet. That there is mockery in the language is undeniable. The question I propose to raise is whether, after all, the conclusion, satisfactory or not, is not that which follows from the reasoning on Hume's principles, and the violent contrast between *exordium* and peroration itself a part of the mockery.

If we are to find any coherence in Hume's argument, we must, in the first place, elimi-

nate an ambiguity which can hardly be accounted for except by the writer's determination to make a sensation, the ambiguity of the term "miracle" itself. A "miracle" may mean either of two very different things; it may mean simply an unusual and arresting event, an event "out of the common course," or it may mean an event, not necessarily particularly unusual, which is held to disclose, as most events do not, the *direct* activity of God as author and controller of events; a miracle may be either a mere "wonder" or it may be a "sign," and, as every one knows, in the language of theology no event is called a "miracle" unless it combines both characters. But the second is, from the theologian's point of view, the more important. St Thomas¹, for example, reckons among minor "miracles" such events as the relief of a "fever" by the offering of a prayer, a process which he must have believed to be illustrated by daily occurrences, and Dante is following the same doctrine when he appeals to the story of the opportune cackling of the Capitoline geese as evidence that "miracles" prove the divine selection of the Roman people for universal empire². Manifestly it is clear that there are

¹ *S. c. G.* III. 101.

² *Monarchia*, II. 4.

two quite distinct, though connected, questions which need to be carefully distinguished: (1) What sort and amount of evidence is needed to justify belief in the reality of an unusual occurrence? (2) Whether such occurrences, if there is evidence for them, can rightly be employed as proof of the control of events by a divine purpose. It is one question whether there can be adequate evidence of the occurrence of events "out of the common course," another what the evidential worth of such events as testimony to the doctrines of a "religion" may be. The first question belongs to inductive logic, the second to theology, and nothing but confusion can come of the attempt to treat the two questions as one. It is also clear on the face of it that Hume's essay begins as a discussion of the first question, and that the introduction of the second is a piece of irrelevance. The conclusion which was to deliver the "wise" from "superstition" once and for all should have been that events sufficiently out of the daily routine are so inherently improbable that any counter-probability suggested by the amount of testimony in their favour may be dismissed as infinitesimal. This, if it could be established, would make the raising of the theological issue superfluous.

- Or, at most, all that it would be relevant to urge would be the subsidiary consideration that the theological convictions of witnesses of the alleged events are likely to be a source of antecedent bias. Even this reflection should, in strict logic, be dispensed with, if it can be independently established that *no* amount of testimony, biased or not, has any weight, if only the event testified to is sufficiently strange. Now if Hume had confined himself to this contention, his argument would have gained in force and coherence: there would have been none of the perplexities introduced by the repeated change of the initial definition of a "miracle," nor would the whole reasoning have been imperilled, as it is, by the damaging concession that a departure from "uniform law" may after all be accounted as a fact, if the testimony is abundant and good enough, or by the arbitrary decision that testimony might be sufficient to prove the occurrence of a world-wide darkness of a week's duration and yet not require any examination if it were offered in favour of a "resurrection." We do less than justice to Hume's acuteness if we imagine that he was not alive to the havoc made in his argument by this confusion of the issues, and it is only reasonable to suppose

that the irrelevance is due to a purpose. Without the sensational attack on the theologians, the main argument would probably have attracted no particular attention from any one; the *Enquiry* would have been as little talked about as the *Treatise*, and Hume was, above everything, determined that he would be talked about.

What remains to be considered, then, is the question what Hume's main argument amounts to when all the irrelevance has been removed, and it is taken simply as an argument about the value of testimony to the strange and unprecedented. Even when taken in this way, at first sight the argument is bound to seem curiously wrong-headed. We are apparently told that assent should always be based on a careful weighing of the direct and indirect evidence on both sides of a question, and this is, then, strangely enough made the ground for asserting that, if only an alleged occurrence is unusual enough, we need not weigh the evidence produced for it. We may confidently dismiss our witnesses unheard. If this were really Hume's meaning, it is clear that his conclusion and his premisses would be oddly at variance, and it is not surprising that a disciple like Huxley, who was anxious

to maintain the conclusion, but to maintain it with some appearance of logic, should have restated the case in a way which abandons Hume's main contention. With Huxley, the main weight of the conclusion is made to rest on the assertion that in actual fact the testimony which has been produced to the occurrence of "miracles" has always been dubious or inadequate. Whether this is the fact or not, it is at least an appeal to what is itself an ascertainable fact, and can only be made after that very scrutiny of the testimony in the particular case from which Hume promises to deliver "the wise." If we are careful, however, to remember certain fundamental positions of Hume's general philosophy, we shall see that, before we can get at the real meaning of his argument, we have to translate its terms into the language of Humian scepticism, and that when we do so, the reasoning proceeds to a conclusion which is valid enough, though quite unsensational.

We have to bear in mind, to begin with, Hume's peculiar doctrine about the nature of assent or belief, a doctrine proclaimed loudly enough both in the *Treatise* and in the *Enquiry*. A belief, we must remember, is explicitly asserted to be simply "a lively idea"

associated with a "present impression"; it is only in respect of its superior "liveliness" that a belief differs from a fancy, or assenting to a proposition from merely framing it. "I believe this," we are told in so many words, means only "I feel at this moment a strong propension to consider things in this light," and it is because belief means no more than this, that Hume professes to believe his own metaphysic, though, as he ingenuously says, he forgets about it and virtually denies it whenever he mixes in the social life of his fellows. While he is meditating alone in his study, though at no other time, he feels a strong propension to consider things in the fashion of the *Treatise*, and this, of itself, is believing, for the time, in the *Treatise* and its doctrines. It is another of Hume's convictions that, though beliefs have causes, they never have sufficient justifying reasons, and that in the sequence of events, there are "customary conjunctions," but never discernible "connections." There is no pattern in the course of events in virtue of which any event should require one continuation into the future rather than another. Each event has its own special character and all events are loose and separated. There is no discoverable reason why

any one event should not be "conjoined" with any other whatsoever as its sequel. What events are followed by what we discover only by experience, and experience is a purely passive awareness of sequence. It follows that, when we hear from Hume of "uniform experience" and of "laws of nature," uniform experience can mean no more than a type of sequence which has been regular so far as our own recollection and that of the other persons with whom we are in communication, goes. (Indeed, it is plain that it is only by the courtesy of an opponent that Hume is entitled to bring in the reference to the experience of any one but myself. A second person who makes a statement to me about *his* experience may always be mistaken or untruthful, and, in the end, it will be my own personal acquaintance with the sequence of events by which I have to judge whether or not he is a credible witness.) Similarly, an "inviolable law of nature," when we translate the words into their equivalent in Humian metaphysics, means no more than a type of sequence which, so far as my own recollections, eked out by those of any other persons in whom I rightly or wrongly put credence, go, has been uniform. Next we have to remember

that the same considerations must be applied in interpreting the statement that our knowledge of the sequences in nature depends on "customary experience." This does not mean, and in the *Treatise* Hume is at pains to make the point clear, that there is any discoverable reason why there should be a fixed routine in the course of events, and a routine which each of us can discover from the small fragment of the sequence open to his personal observation. There is no logical ground for expecting that the sequence of events will conform to any rule; any one event might perfectly well be succeeded by any other. All that is meant is that it is an inexplicable, non-rational tendency of the human mind to *expect* that the usual will happen and that the unusual will not. Repetition gives rise to a subjective "association of ideas" and therefore to expectation; in fact, the probability of an event, as is explained in the *Treatise*, means neither more nor less than the degree of "vivacity" with which some one imagines, and therefore anticipates, it. "Customary sequence" is thus only a cause, not a justifying ground, for our anticipations. To put the point quite simply, all our judgments are judgments, true or false, about actual fact; there are no



judgments of value, neither a logical *ought* nor a moral *ought*. Just as "this is right" means only "the disinterested spectator, as a fact, contemplates this with pleasure," so "this is probable," "this is certain," means only that "actual observers expect this with a less or greater degree of confidence." This universal reduction of all propositions to statements about actual occurrences is the most characteristic and important peculiarity of Hume's whole philosophy. The ideal before his mind is the same which inspires the chief work of Avenarius, the elimination from all assertions of every element which is not "pure experience," simple record of the event without interpretation or valuation. The problem he has not faced is that directly suggested by the *Critique of Pure Experience*, the question whether intelligence, as distinguished from mere insignificant reaction to stimulus, would not vanish completely from a community in which the ideal had been realised.

- Let us, then, re-state Hume's main argument in the terms of his own philosophy. It will be seen, I think, that it amounts to this.
- It is a fact, and a fact of which no explanation can be given, that repetition gives rise to "associations of ideas," and that the strength

of these associations depends on the frequency of the repetition. The more often I have seen *A* followed by *B*, and the less often I have seen *A* occur without being followed by *B*, the harder I find it to believe that *A* will occur, or has ever occurred, without being followed by *B*. Similarly, if I have never seen *A* followed by *C*, I shall not imagine *C*, and consequently shall not expect *C*, to occur as a continuation of *A*. This is the ultimate causal explanation of habits of thought and expectation. They are, in fact, prejudices without logical value, as the *Treatise* declares in deliberately provocative language, but the strength of the prejudice may be, as a fact of my mental make-up, invincible. This, and no more, is all that Hume is entitled, on his own principles, to mean when he talks of the inconceivability of the violation of a uniform law of nature. Properly speaking, there are no laws of nature to be violated, but there are habits of expectation which any one of us, as a fact, finds himself unable to break through. Since, again, we discover, also as a fact for which we can give no reason, that it is "customary repetition" which appears to be the foundation of these habits, it is also the fact that we expect a certain sequence with the

greater confidence the more familiar its type is to us, and that, if an alleged sequence of events is sufficiently startling and contrary to our expectations, we feel a stronger propensity to consider the statements of witnesses as mistakes or lies—things of which we have some experience—than to accept them as true. We find it easier to imagine vividly that our witness is deceived, or is deceiving us, than to imagine the events he describes. The conclusion to which we are led is thus, like the premisses from which we started, a simple proposition of fact. Men find the unusual hard to imagine in proportion to its unusualness, and there is a point, for any one of us, when the difficulty amounts to a psychological impossibility. When this point is reached, the unimaginable event is a “miracle.” Thus the conclusion to which the argument is leading us is really the assertion of fact that a “miracle” is not believed in by any one, being *ex vi termini* simply any event so unexpected that we find it easier to imagine the falsity of the testimony than to imagine the occurrence of the event.

Now, if Hume had ended his essay at this point, it could have brought him no notoriety, and it could not have proved anything which

could well be disputed. The pious and the impious, the orthodox and unorthodox alike, might well have agreed that there are some things which any man does find incredible. The trouble is that men differ so much from one another in the matter of what, in particular, each finds incredible. What we want to know, if we are to write or read history, is not what a given man finds credible or incredible, but what we *ought* as rational beings to pronounce credible or incredible, and the philosopher of "pure experience" can give us no guidance here. Hume, for example, indicates that in his opinion a resurrection from the dead is flatly incredible, no matter what the apparent testimony for it may be, whereas a week of world-wide darkness is credible, if there is enough testimony for it, though both events seem equally to baffle our powers of rational explanation. Any one of us who does not feel the special "propensions" of Hume on this point, may obviously ask him to justify his position, if he can, by showing that there is some difference in principle between the two cases. What is more, any man who finds any event whatever not wholly unimaginable may pertinently ask Hume why that particular event should be placed in the category of those

which may be disposed of as unreal without examination of testimony. It is this obvious reflection which both justifies and demands the apparently inconsistent concession to the Christian believer with which Hume has seen fit to end his essay. The tone of *persiflage* is manifest throughout the paragraphs, but the whole is not *persiflage*; there is a real concession which is absolutely demanded by Hume's own radical "positivism."

The main result really reached had been that, in point of fact, men find it hard to believe the marvellous, and if the marvel is sufficiently astounding, they refuse to believe. In plain language, this ought to mean that no one ever does believe in the reality of a sequence of events quite unlike the routine of his customary experience. But this conclusion would be manifestly false in fact. For Hume could not deny that, to take the most familiar example, there were many sincere orthodox Christians in his own society and that they did, as a fact, believe in the reality of certain events to which their customary experience afforded no analogy. It might be argued, though not very reasonably by an avowed irrationalist, that the orthodox have no right to hold their convictions; but the fact that

they did hold them, and hold them with assurance, was beyond dispute, and it has to be shown that this fact is itself consistent with Hume's own principles. Otherwise the principles would themselves be completely discredited as leading, by logical necessity, to a conclusion false in fact. This explains the serious motive for the apparently paradoxical concessions which Hume proceeds to make. There would be a real paradox, if it were part of Hume's case that "customary experience," and it only, provides a rational justification for our beliefs about the course of events. But his position is that none of these beliefs have any rational justification; belief, as the *Treatise* says, is more of the nature of sensation than of the nature of reason. The only problem that can be raised about our beliefs is that of their cause, and Hume has insisted strongly on the point that all we can say about the cause of belief is that, as a fact, it is commonly produced by "customary experience." We could not say that it cannot be produced in any other way, for to say so would be to go beyond the limits of the factual. And the existence of a single genuine believer in the unusual is empirical proof that, as a matter of fact, "customary experience," though the

commonest, is not the only cause of belief. Now Hume has been careful to protest against any assumption that there is a rational connection of any kind between customary repetition and belief. That the repetition of a certain sequence of events should make us expect its recurrence with the greater confidence, the oftener the repetition has been noted, is, according to him, a fact of human nature which we can observe, but for which we can allege no justifying reason. (It is on a par with the gambler's belief in the continuation of a run of luck, a belief neither more nor less rational than the opposing belief, also found among gamblers, that the "luck must change.") It is thus only what might be expected—if in a world where there are only "conjunctions" we can talk of what may be expected—that "custom" should be only the customary, not the invariable, cause of belief. And, since there is no discoverable connection between repetition and belief, you cannot tell the man who confidently believes in the reality of the unparalleled that his belief is unreasonable. He finds in himself, as Hume takes care to put it, "a determination to believe what is contrary to custom and experience." But, on Hume's own show-

ing, to believe what is contrary to custom is neither more nor less reasonable than to believe what is conformable to custom. It is less usual, and we have no right to say anything more. This is, in fact, what Hume does say, in more provocative language, when he speaks of the Christian believer as having a standing "miracle" within himself, which makes him proof against all reasoning against the miraculous. The strict meaning of the statement is simply that in this case the believer's "propension to see things in a certain light" has causes which are not those of other men's belief, nor of his own beliefs about the majority of things. Stated thus baldly, Hume's conclusion would be at once proper to a consistently "sceptical" philosophy and quite acceptable to the vast majority of the orthodox. In fact, what would be shocking to any man who was deeply religious as well as orthodox would be the suggestion that the motives of credibility in matters of religion are of the same order as those involved in believing or disbelieving a newspaper report of travel or exploration. Why the statement that this is not so should have been couched in language which was certain to create scandal can hardly be explained except by

Hume's resolution to attract notice at all costs.

There is another side to the matter which demands a word or two. From the position of his own sceptical philosophy, Hume is not entitled to regard the belief of the man who "has the miracle in himself" as inherently more or less unreasonable than his own. But there can be no doubt in what light Hume was himself "strongly inclined" to view all such matters, and we can quite understand that he would contemplate the orthodox, whose "propensions" are so unlike his own, with a detached amusement. To his eminently secular mind they would be no better than entertaining oddities. But there is another party whom Hume must have found equally entertaining for precisely the same reason, the militant rationalist who assails orthodoxy in the name of science. Rational science goes outside the limits of a philosophy of pure experience in much the same way as dogmatic theology. The greater part of Hume's *Treatise* had been devoted to an attempt to demolish the foundation-stones of a rational science of nature. Necessary connection, the permanence of substance, the extra-mental reality of the physical world, are all dismissed as super-

stitutions. To use more modern language, no "constants" are left in nature, unless we can give the name of a "natural constant" to our own inexplicable and unjustified prejudice in favour of the usual and familiar. From this point of view, the man of science, who builds on the "uniformity of nature," and the divine, who appeals to the immutable attributes of his God, are alike constructing dogmatic theories on a basis of "extra-belief." Spinoza, the typical assertor of natural necessity, and the theologians may both be beaten equally effectually with the same stick, since both go beyond the limits of fact in precisely the same fashion, by "feigning" that there is real "connection" where they should have been content to record mere "conjunction." It follows that "our most holy religion" does not stand alone in being founded on a "faith" which has no foundation in reason. The same faith is also the foundation of our most admirable science. The only difference which could be pleaded as giving an advantage to science is that the predictions of the scientific man, up to the present, have largely been found to be verified by the course of events; the predictions of the theologian, which concern an unseen order, are naturally incapable

of this verification. On closer scrutiny the apparent advantage is found to vanish. For we have no means of knowing that the theologian's predictions, too, *may* not get their verification; the predictions of science are never verified more than approximately, and we do not know that the course of events may not change its character at any moment in a way which would deprive them of even approximate verification. That they have proved trustworthy up to the present is no more than a curious and inexplicable "happy coincidence."

Hume's light-hearted irony has, then, a double edge. As he says, in effect, the Christian believer is staking his all on a mere promise which, for all we can prove, may remain eternally unfulfilled. As he does not say in the context, but in effect urges all through his polemic against rationalist dogmatism, the convinced believer in science is equally staking everything on a promise of the same kind to which the course of events may give the lie at any moment. The believer in God and the believer in an order of nature both have the same consciousness of a "miracle" within their own breasts. That either should excommunicate the other for their common guilt of "extra-

belief" is the feature of the situation which the "academical" philosopher finds entertaining. The "naturalist" who derides his neighbour's "groundless" anticipations of the joys of Paradise forgets that, on Hume's showing, his own anticipation that the sun will rise to-morrow is equally groundless. If only the half of this condemnation of all anticipations of the course of things as alike unintelligent is actually expressed in the essay, the reason must be that notoriety was to be got by an attack on the Church; an attack on the Royal Society would pass unregarded.

As a contribution to logic, Hume's essay is thus an attack not so much on the credibility of "miracles" as on the validity of induction. His point, if one works it out, is that all inference from the present occasion to anything beyond itself presupposes some metaphysical theory of the structure of the world as a whole, whereas the world revealed to us by "experience" has *no* structure; it is a mere series of loose and separate incidents. Now this is half the truth. Even if it were the case, as Dr Broad has so brilliantly shown that it is not, that scientific induction can be reduced, as Hume tries to reduce it, to a mere application of the theory of Probability, the

difficulty would still remain. For—to appeal again to a principle which has been made specially clear by the work of Cambridge philosophers—there is no such thing as *the* probability of a given event, there are only probabilities relative to a given set of premisses, and such a set of premisses inevitably includes some metaphysical assumption about the structure of the world as a whole. Hume himself makes one such wholly undemonstrable assumption of the utmost importance when he rests his whole philosophical edifice on the proposition, admitted by himself to be incompatible with other equally indispensable postulates, that “all our perceptions are distinct existences, and the mind never perceives any connection between its ideas,” in other words, that all events are loose and separate. This assumption, once made, ought to dispose not merely of all dogmatism, theological or scientific, as Hume intended it should, but of every attempt to regard any one event as more or less probable than any other. In principle it excludes all inference from the particular occasion to anything beyond itself, and therefore leads direct to the denial of the very possibility of science, even when the pretensions of science have been reduced to the

most modest proportions. If the doctrine is to be carried out regardless of consequence, even the most abstract pure logic and mathematics cannot escape condemnation. For if there is really no means of transcending the particularity of the particular occasion, even my statement that two and three make five can be no more than a record of the event that I have, on this occasion, counted with this result; I can have no guarantee that the result will be the same the next time I perform the counting. All I am entitled to say is that at present I feel a "propension" to consider the matter in that light. It would be of no avail to introduce a distinction between particular data of sense and "universals" which pervade the data, in the hope of preserving, at any rate, scientific knowledge of the inter-relations of "universals," for, if all events are loose and separate, there can be no warrant for assertions about "pervasive" elements in them. The attempt at analysis itself already implicitly transcends the supposed disconnection of events. Dr Whitehead thus seems to me wholly in the right of it when he insists on the point that the "induction" indispensable to science is not to be regarded as a process of generalisation but as one in which we

“divine” some characteristics of a particular future from the known characteristics of a particular past, except for the slight oversight by which he has spoken of the conclusion inferred to as though it must be “future.” No one, I take it, knows better than Dr Whitehead that the inference may equally well be from one particular past occasion to another equally past. But, of course, the very admission that it is a legitimate procedure to divine any of the characteristics of one occasion from what we know of another occasion demands the surrender of the assumption that “occasions” are simply loose and separate, or in other words, that “experience” is mere awareness of a series of disconnected “events” which are only externally “conjoined.” I cannot dwell long on the point, but I would only urge that in principle this must mean that a scientific view of nature must be much more like that of Leibniz than like that of Hume. So far from being merely “conjoined” as earlier and later, events must have a pattern in virtue of which each brings with it traces of all that has gone before and is big with all that is to come. And to admit so much is to admit that, in the end, the course of events as a whole has a supreme pattern which appears,

with the needful modifications, as the dominant factor in determining the patterns of its parts. What the dominant pattern is, in its detail, we naturally cannot say, since we never see more than fragments of it. But we can, on the supposition that such a pattern is really there, make "divinations" which are more or less true to the main scheme, and these divinations, without which inference could not advance a single step, are the commonly unconscious metaphysical presuppositions which guide us in our judgments of probabilities. They furnish premisses without which we should have no logical justification for pronouncing any one anticipation of experience more or less probable than any other. Were it true that "connection" is, as Hume supposed, not "divined" but simply "feigned," induction would not even be what Mr Bertrand Russell once called it, a method of making "plausible" guesses. It would be guessing without any method, and there would be no sense in calling one guess any more plausible than any other.

The very existence of a dispute between the divine and the man of secular science about the reality of "miracles" is only possible because, unlike Hume, the parties are both,

at bottom, rationalists in their conscious or unconscious metaphysics. In a purely non-rational world, any one occurrence is just as much or as little of a "wonder" as any other. You may say, with Hume, that it is only from customary experience that we can derive the expectation that an event will have a given continuation, or, with the most supernaturalistic of Mohammedans, that the only reason why anything happens is that "Allah almighty disposes it so"; the formulae are different, but their sense is identical. The distinction between the "ordinary" or "normal" and the "astounding" or "miraculous" (in the etymological sense) can only be made on the basis of a metaphysic which recognises a real connection of events by a coherent and all-pervasive pattern. Only where this is a common metaphysical dogma does it become justifiable to raise the question whether better testimony is required to establish the unusual and surprising.

If by a miracle we mean simply an unusual occurrence, it may then become a mere problem in the estimation of opposing probabilities to determine whether the reality of such an occurrence is credible. From this point of view there could be no question of

dismissing testimony unexamined as intrinsically worthless, but it would be possible to accept the general principle that the antecedent unlikeliness of the facts testified to makes it reasonable to demand exceptionally abundant and weighty testimony. The one criticism one would feel inclined to pass upon Hume's version of this principle would be that he forgets that the probabilities with which we have to reckon in matters of history are mostly not of the kind which admit of exact mathematical expression. A wise man is regularly determined in his decision to credit human testimony by "imponderables" to which no calculus can assign probability-coefficients.

The real issue, in the case of "miracles" appealed to as of significance for religion, is not the bare antecedent probability of unusual events. The unusual event gets its significance as a "miracle," in the religious sense of the word, from the conviction that it is an event in which the character of a divine purpose underlying the whole course of events becomes exceptionally transparent; it is a "sign" of the mercy, the justice, the power of God. It follows at once that our whole attitude towards the credibility of miracles is profoundly

- affected by our ultimate metaphysical position.
- The problem cannot even be discussed with any profit between two parties of whom one is a Theist and the other an atheist or a pure agnostic. For they will differ profoundly about the nature of the pattern which binds nature into a connected system. On any rationalistic hypothesis, startling and singular events must be reasonably expected to occur from time to time, and there can, so far as I can see, be no means of saying in advance how startling the surprises which the course of events contains may prove to be to us, who are familiar, after all, with so small a fragment of the whole. But, in an atheistic or neutral metaphysical scheme, there would be no reason to expect the surprises to wear any special character, or to be distributed in any special way over space and time. We should expect them to make their appearances as simple
 - “freaks.” If our philosophical world-scheme is definitely theistic, the case is altered completely.
 - For we shall then conceive of the pattern of events as a whole not merely as providing a connection between them, but as providing a connection which is intelligent in the sense that, like the structure of a symphony, or a well-lived life, it exhibits the

realisation of an end of absolute value. We should, thus, antecedently look for the "singularities" in nature and history to exhibit a special kind of concentration, exactly as the surprises in the construction of a great piece of music or the conduct of a life of wise originality exhibit the same concentration. The intelligence of the great musician or the great statesman shows itself neither in unbroken adherence to an iron routine nor in wild eccentricity. It reveals itself in the way in which conformity to routine, where there is nothing to be gained by departure, is combined with bold and original departure from routine because the situation makes the demand for it. A Theist, conceiving of the pattern of events in the light of such analogies, will thus reasonably regard it as to be expected that surprises of a certain kind and in certain historic connections, surprises which contribute, so to say, to a plan, "worthy of God," should occur in history and that others should not, exactly as one would expect some kinds of musical surprises in a newly discovered symphony professing to be by Beethoven, but would emphatically not expect others. Thus the difference in ultimate metaphysical outlook between a Theist and

a non-theistic philosopher would make a difference between the two sets of initial premisses relatively to which each estimates the probability of certain events. It is not in the least unreasonable, for example, in a convinced Theist to be satisfied with evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ which would not satisfy him of the resurrection of his next-door neighbour, since he may well ascribe to the resurrection of Christ a unique spiritual value for the whole history of the human race which he could not ascribe to the resurrection of his neighbour. We should be misconceiving the whole issue if we did not bear in mind that what is affirmed by the Christian creed is not simply the resurrection of some man, but the resurrection of just this one man and no other.

This is what I meant when I said, a little while back, that the motives of credibility to which the religious man, who is also a thinking man, appeals are of a kind quite other than those which Hume takes into consideration. The determining factor in leading him to believe in certain "miracles," assuming for the moment that he professes a religion which includes this belief, is his underlying conviction that the plan of the world is domi-

nated by certain absolute values, and that these events are the most striking and transparent examples of the dominance of just these values. They are like the comparatively few critical moments in which we find a revelation of the inmost character of a friend and from which we then proceed to interpret the whole of his more ordinary behaviour. It follows, of course, that the whole question of the reality of "miracles," in any but the bare etymological sense of the word, is secondary to the much graver question of the legitimacy of a theistic interpretation of life. The alleged occurrence of miracles cannot itself be rationally made a premiss for the argument for Theism. Two Theists of different creeds, provided they agree in attributing a certain character to God, may discuss the question whether the "miracles" of one of the different creeds are or are not worthy of the character of God. It would be idle to ask any man to accept Theism in any form on the evidence of any kind of "miracle," since, unless he already admits what you are seeking to prove, the most irrefragable evidence that the facts to which you appeal are genuine facts would establish no more than the hardly disputable conclusion that strange things do

sometimes happen. It is thus not surprising that, as Francis Bacon remarks, miracles have been wrought to convince idolators, but none to convince atheists.

The point I want to make, then, is this. The problem of Hume's essay, as Hume himself states it, is vitiated by illegitimate simplification. When we are dealing with testimony to a startling event which claims also to have the value of a "sign" from the unseen, we have two questions, not one only, on our hands. There is, of course, the preliminary question, which arises whenever we have to decide for or against accepting testimony, the question of the quality of the testimony, the intelligence and *bona fides* of the witnesses, the nature of the agreements and disagreements between their reports, the presumption that these reports are independent, and the like.

2. When we have satisfied ourselves, if we succeed in doing so, that our evidence is unexceptional in all these respects, there still remains two real questions, not to be disposed of by these antecedent considerations: (1) Is it more likely that the most unexceptional witnesses should fail us in this case or that the event to which they testify is a fact, and (2) if it is a fact, is it merely a puzzling fact, or has it

the value of a "sign"? Our answer to *both* questions, I hold, is legitimately influenced by our metaphysic. If our metaphysic is definitely theistic, it will be rational to regard such "signs" as likely to mark the course of history; if it is anti-theistic or neutral, the same expectations will not be, for us, rational. Whether it is rational to be prepared to acknowledge "miracle" as a feature of the historical process is thus a question which depends on a prior question: Is it irrational to be Theists in our metaphysics? As I have said, it would involve an obvious circle in our reasoning if we alleged the occurrence of miraculous events as the ground for adopting a theistic metaphysic. If a theistic interpretation of the course of events is to be justified, the justification must be based on the *cursus ordinarius* of nature. Our metaphysic, if it is to be more than an idle play of fancy, must be a response of thought to the full concrete reality of the world in which our life is set. And I think it follows that we cannot expect to arrive at a metaphysic of any great worth so long as we confine our contemplation to the domain of formal logic, or epistemology, or even of experimental science. We and our fellows are ourselves a part of the world to be

interpreted, and we have no right to assume at the outset that we may not even be its most important part. The material for interpretation is supplied not only by the natural sciences of the laboratory, the observatory, and the field, but by the whole history of man with his ideals, his achievements, his failures, his self-condemnations, his hopes and his fears. For the tissue of life is inextricably woven of all these strands, though we are tempted, in an age of unavoidable specialism, to forget the fact when we retire to our studies or our laboratories and concentrate our attention on the artificial and poverty-stricken extract from the wealth of the real world which we call our special "subject." Like the Ephesians of the time of Heraclitus, we retire each into a poor little private world of our own, and forget the "common," and this, as that great man said, is to live like men half-asleep. Indeed, it is so to be logicians, or chemists, or historians or ethnologists that we forget to be men. The fault is not wholly our own, and it cannot well be escaped by our generation, though we may be permitted to imagine with innocent envy the possible happier lot of our successors, if some great social and economic change should simplify this intellectual pro-

blem by leading to the destruction of the masses of accumulated misapplied "erudition" which are our nightmare. But it is our fault if we make no attempt to escape complete subdual to that in which—for our sins—we have to work. The final verdict on the question whether theism is not a legitimate, or, it may be, a necessary feature of a metaphysic which can "give account" of the real world in all its real fullness could be expected neither from an age of specialists like our own, nor from an age of gentlemanly loiterers, like the literary coteries of the eighteenth century. For a voice which might speak with compelling authority we have to look to a society which has an intensely rich and full life of its own and yet is not mastered by it but masters it, "sees it steadily and sees it whole." For my own part, I think I know what the verdict of such a society would be. I cannot, of course, expect that all my hearers should be of my mind. What kind of response one makes to life will, no doubt, for better or worse, depend on the sort of man one is for good or bad. One will respond with a different metaphysic according as one thinks that "we are such stuff As dreams are made on," or μέγας ὁ ἀγών, οὐχ ὅσος δοκεῖ. But we can all

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make it our purpose that our philosophy, if we have one, shall be no mere affair of surface opinions, but the genuine expression of a whole personality. Because I can never feel that Hume's own philosophy was that, I have to own to a haunting uncertainty whether Hume was really a great philosopher, or only a "very clever man."

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